This article was published more than **9 years ago**

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Climate and Environment

Want to get conservatives to save energy? Stop the environmentalist preaching

February 12, 2015

By Chris Mooney

This is the third article in a three-part series titled "Your Brain on Energy" for our new Energy and Environment coverage. For Part I, click here. For Part II, click here.

In San Diego, the solar rooftop market is booming. And no wonder: Electricity is expensive, but sunshine is plentiful – and it doesn't hurt that California has shined its policy radiance on the solar industry. The city boasts more than 44,000 residential solar installations – and most strikingly, they're not all owned by liberal do-gooders.

Not by a long shot.

Instead, as solar has become more popular, it has increasingly tapped into a base of more ideologically conservative customers, according to the Center for Sustainable Energy, a local nonprofit supporting clean power.

"When it was more of a fringe technology, you would see a natural gravitation towards the technology by people who are more liberal," says Timothy Treadwell, a director at the center. "Now that solar is mainstream, that distinction, and that kind of self-selection, is pretty much gone from the market."

So what happened? Treadwell recently surveyed 1,200 San Diego area solar adopters about their political beliefs and why they had installed solar. Liberals and conservatives were evenly mixed in the group. Their reasons for installing panels were very different: While liberals were much more likely to do so for environmental reasons, conservatives held to hard-nosed economic ones, like reducing their electricity costs.

The conservatives have come around, in Treadwell's view, because they heard the right message. "It went from being viewed as a nice thing to do for the planet, and it turned into this very clear, understandable value proposition," he says. "If you're paying hundreds of dollars a month for electricity, why wouldn't you do it?"

Which may be the key to something of holy grail in the energy sphere – getting political conservatives to participate in environmental or energy conservation programs and behaviors to the same extent that liberals do.

The left, the right, and power

When it comes to saving energy, let's face it: Liberals – and especially liberal environmentalists — are already on board. Research has shown they are (not surprisingly) more likely to buy Priuses and conserve gasoline, and appear to use less energy overall — 10 percent less than those who are politically conservative and live in conservative communities.

Similarly, people who believe that global warming is real are more likely to take public transit or car pool. And to walk or ride a bike, than to drive. And turn down the heat in winter. All of this fits the assumptions and stereotypes that many of us hold. But it's not very satisfying: We need to change everybody's energy habits to save the planet, and if conservatives conserve less (or use more), then there is a much bigger bang for your buck if you can change their behavior.

"You find that people who are ideologically not very green, usually have higher baseline usage," says Neil Lessem, an economist with the Brattle Group in San Francisco. "They're using more power, which means that there's more low hanging fruit, so it's easier for them to conserve."

How do you do that? Figuring it out is one of the more contentious offshoots of a broader movement that's trying to understand the behavioral and psychological reasons for how people use energy. The goal is to find ways to shift or "nudge" people's personal behavior, which on a population scale could substantially reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

So what are the nudge points? Researchers have found several. For instance: We are biased towards the status quo and against making changes to habits and routines. We often follow our peers and the crowd. And how you talk to us matters as much as or even more than what you're saying – we're very susceptible to what are called framing effects.

Yet such generalizations, while they may be true about people in general, can elide individual differences. We're not all the same, and one of the most fascinating (and controversial) aspects of the field has focused on differences between the left and the right.

This is controversial territory, and not only because people don't like having their political beliefs and behaviors psychoanalyzed. It's also because some results have painted conservatives in a pretty negative light – or appeared to. Which is not to say that's what researchers are aiming for – they say they'd like to better engage conservatives, and connect with them about the benefits of energy efficiency in ways they will appreciate.

“A more sophisticated environmental movement would figure out how to motivate rather than demonize political conservatives,” writes UCLA environmental economist Matthew Kahn.

Behavioral light bulbs

It helps, perhaps, to start with an example of what not to do.

In a March 2009 broadcast, conservative show host Rush Limbaugh told a story that (like many of his) would make a liberal’s jaw drop. He had been watching Larry King the night before, he said, where he heard Alanis Morissette and Edward Norton tell people to turn their lights off for an hour as part of a worldwide “Earth Hour” event.

So Limbaugh proceeded to do the opposite. “I wanted to make sure I could use as much damn power as I could,” he said. “I turned the thermostats down to 70 degrees, 68 degrees. I turned on every light in the house! I turned on every light in the back yard and aimed ’em down so they wouldn’t hit the turtles! I mean, I had my house lit up like a Christmas tree last night.”

The conservation message, for Limbaugh, had backfired. It didn’t make him want to save energy. It made him want to consume, and thumb his nose at environmentalists.

Some studies suggest Limbaugh may not be alone. A 2013 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, for instance, examined how liberals and conservatives felt about energy-efficient compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs), and how that varied by whether they were marketed with “green” messaging.

When liberals and conservatives were given a choice about whether to buy a CFL over an incandescent lightbulb – after being informed about how much money and power CFLs save over time – something interesting happened. If the two products were the same price, conservatives and liberals both picked the CFL, no matter how it was marketed. But if the CFL cost more and was labeled with “Protect the Environment,” then conservatives balked.

That does not mean conservatives oppose energy efficiency – or saving money. Rather, it means they don’t like having environmentalist ideological messages rubbed in their noses.

“Some wrong messages that could be taken from it are, conservatives don’t like energy efficient products,” says Richard Larrick of the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University, one of the study’s authors. “That’s not true. If the savings are there and there’s no environmental statement attached to it, they look just like the liberals.”

Thy neighbor’s energy use

And that’s not the most controversial study. To understand that work, consider one of the most influential behavioral research paradigms in the field of energy use – the basis of a successful company, Opower, which works with utilities to help customers save energy.

Opower, which went public in early 2014 and was recently valued at about $ 650 million, has its origins in a work of behavioral science research. The study, led by psychology and marketing scholar Robert Cialdini of the University of Arizona (now Opower's chief scientist) and a colleague, found that peer influence was an effective way to reduce energy use – people saved more if they passed a sign on their front door encouraging them to "Join Your Neighbors in Conserving Energy."

In later research, Cialdini and his colleagues also found that showing people how their energy use compared with that of their neighbors could be persuasive. One catch: Sometimes the messages were accompanied by emoticons: a smiley face if the house was using less energy than neighbors, a frowny face if it wasn't.

Sometimes, sharing this knowledge triggered an unexpected twist: Residents told they were using more energy than peers used less, but those who were using less energy actually increased it – a response dubbed a "boomerang effect" by the authors. When smiley faces were included in the messages, however, that stopped. Instead, homes using more energy than average – earning a frown – reduced their use, while homes using less than average – receiving a smiley face – just kept on saving.

Such research led to Opower's now famous three bar chart, mailed to many utility customers along with their bills, showing the household's energy use and how it stacked up. Here's a generic example, courtesy of Opower:

Opower is now able to document – through access to utility company billing data – that upon receiving this mailer, customers cut their energy use by 2 percent on average. Added up across a base of 15 million customers who receive these reports, that's a *lot* of energy saved.

Individual differences?

But do liberals and conservatives respond in the same way to such an intervention?

Here's where the controversy comes in. Two UCLA researchers, Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn, conducted an experiment similar to the one described above, in which households were provided a "Home Energy Report" detailing their use and comparing it to that of their neighbors. Only this time, the researchers also examined the political ideology of survey participants, based on voter registration and other data sources. "We posit that liberals/environmentalists are more likely to respond to energy conservation nudges," they wrote.

This was no small or minor study: They had a vast dataset of consumer energy bills from a "large California utility district," enough to conduct a randomized trial in which some consumers received a report about their home energy use and how it compared to their neighbors, and others did not. How big? The control group – those who did not receive the home energy report – was some 49,000 homes. The treatment group – those who did – was nearly 35,000.

The result? Not only did the study find that the home energy report was "two to four times more effective" for liberals than for conservatives at reducing their energy use. It also found that conservatives were "more likely than liberals to opt out of receiving the home electricity report and to report disliking the report."

In other words, conservatives may be a tougher sell — and different methods might be needed to help them save energy. “What works in California may not work in Lubbock, Texas,” the authors wrote.

But the story isn’t over: In a subsequent analysis, Opower found different results in a sample of over 100,000 Midwestern customers. Conservatives used more energy overall – by 3 percent – but actually saved a sliver more after receiving home energy reports for 2.5 years. Proceeding to look at other regions of the country, Opower found that only in the Mountain West did liberals cut their energy use significantly more than conservatives after receiving the report.

“We’re excited to share one way in which liberals and conservatives are more similar than they might think: they both save significant amounts of electricity when presented with personalized analysis of their energy consumption,” noted the post.

Kahn declined to comment for this article. Opower’s Carly Llewellyn says: “We’ve found that behavioral nudges work across all demographics, including political affiliation. We don’t disagree with that paper, but [Opower’s blog response] is a supplement.”

Thus, it’s possible that conservatives respond differently, in some contexts, after receiving messages about home energy use – but it’s hard to say the matter is settled.

Changing messages (about changing lightbulbs)

So how to put what behavioral scientists are learning to good use, not to alarm or annoy conservatives, but to help everybody save money on their bills? The answer seems pretty clear: targeted messaging.

“Based on people’s political leanings, they have different values, so if you rely on one value that’s highly associated with one side of the aisle, you may be missing out in reaching out to people who are on the other side of the aisle and don’t have those same values,” says Dena Gromet of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, the lead author of the CFL study.

According to Gromet’s co-author Richard Larrick of Duke, it’s already happening. “Marketers in the U.S. at least seem to be aware that a heavy emphasis on the environment in advertising isn’t a good thing, that you ought to focus on cost savings,” he says. That message, Larrick says, works with liberals and conservatives.

Indeed, one company in the behavioral space, Simple Energy in Boulder, Colo. – an Opower rival – is examining political beliefs as just one factor out of many that may shape how people perceive energy messages. CEO and founder Yoav Lurie says his company has found, for instance, that terminology matters. “Liberal respondents tended to resonate well with the term ‘save energy,’ where conservative households resonated better with the term ‘waste less energy,’” he notes.

“It turns out that ‘waste less’ works in liberal households as well,” Lurie adds, “so you might just change that message to ‘waste less.’”

He emphasizes that his company is not selectively messaging to different consumers based on ideology, but it could be a potential way to reach people. When it comes to the message, Lurie says, “the thing we care about most is how it’s received.”

In the end, then, perhaps the best way to think about ideology and energy use is this: Nobody is against efficiency or lower bills. Nobody is for waste. Nobody hates the environment.

But environmental and energy issues are nevertheless wrapped up in politics, which makes conservation, overall, less of a “safe” space for conservatives, according to Renee Lertzman, who works with Brand Cool as Director of Insight and is a consultant on climate change communications. Conservatives often feel “ambivalent” about the topic, she says, pulled in different directions — and liberal assumptions don’t help.

“A lot of people I interviewed felt very offended that they were often assumed to be not caring, they felt very insulted and patronized, because of their choices, and I really felt for that,” Lertzman says. “I felt, it would be so important to convey to people, we know you really do care. And that itself, as a starting off point, would be very powerful.”

This is the third article in a three-part series titled “Your Brain on Energy” for our new Energy and Environment coverage. For Part I, click here. For Part II, click here.